SUMMARY

Proposed Action

The Idaho Power Company (IPC) proposes to construct, operate, and maintain the Brownlee–Oxbow #2 230kV Transmission Line Project (Project), an 11-mile, double-circuit transmission line extending from the Brownlee Switchyard to the Oxbow Switchyard. Corten steel poles would range in height from 85 feet to 120 feet with average spans of 700 to 1000 feet. The Project extends over lands under the jurisdiction of the Vale District of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and in private ownership. The Project would be constructed within a BLM designated utility corridor replacing an aging 69kV transmission line.

The proposed Project would expand transmission capacity and allow for increased import of electrical power from other Northwest generation sources. In addition, a new transmission line would create a third circuit between Brownlee and Oxbow, thus a more reliable system in the event of a double circuit line outage.

BLM Right-of-Way Process

In June 2001, IPC applied for a Right-of-Way (ROW) grant with the BLM to proceed with the Project. Granting a ROW to construct a 230kV transmission line on public lands managed by the BLM requires that BLM comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 and assess environmental impacts associated with the project.

As required by NEPA, the BLM conducted scoping activities to identify potentially significant issues to be analyzed in the EA. The public scoping process determined the range of issues and the depth of analysis to be included in the document. The BLM reviewed existing data and sent scoping letters to interested agencies and tribal representatives. IPC conducted a public scoping meeting in Halfway, Oregon to identify issues, concerns, and opportunities. The information gathered from these activities helped to identify alternative actions, impact assessment, and mitigation planning for the Project.

The key issues and concerns raised during the scoping process included the following:

- Impacts to visual resources
- Impacts to wintering or nesting bald eagles
- Impacts to big game
- Impacts to recreation sites and access
- Impacts resulting from increased soil erosion in the steep canyon are

Alternatives to the Proposed Action

To fulfill the stated Purpose and Need of providing efficient and economical power to its system area while accommodating load growth, IPC evaluated the proposed Project and seven alternatives:

- System Alternatives
- New Generation

- Alternative Technologies
- Alternative Voltages
- Energy Conservation and Load Management
- Routing Alternatives
- Alternative Construction Methods / Helicopter Construction
- No Action

The first seven of these alternatives were considered but eliminated for one or more of the following reasons: 1) the alternative did not meet IPC's Purpose and Need to improve system reliability or improve regional interconnections; 2) the alternative had considerable expense; 3) the alternative had lengthy timeframes for permitting; 4) the alternative had potential for considerable environmental impacts.

The remaining actions are the No-Action Alternative and the alternative to construct and operate a 230kV transmission line and associated substation upgrades. Under the No-Action Alternative no new right-of-way (ROW) would be granted by the BLM to allow construction and operation of the Project and the existing 69kV transmission line would remain in place with its associated maintenance.

Affected Environment

The proposed Project would be located entirely within Baker County, Oregon except for the southern termination point at the Brownlee Substation, which is on the border of Adams and Washington Counties in Idaho. The Hells Canyon area between Brownlee Dam and Oxbow Dam is part of a hydroelectric complex owned by IPC including the Brownlee and Oxbow hydroelectric dams, a transmission system (e.g., 69kV, 138kV, and 230kV), powerhouses, substations and ancillary facilities.

The terrain in the area of the proposed Project is mostly steep and rocky. The Project route crosses side drainages and tributaries of the Snake River. Vegetation within the study corridor consists of shrub-steppe species with some riparian habitat in the tributaries and along Oxbow Reservoir. A number of special status plant and animal species were determined to occur or have potential to occur within the study corridor.

Resource Impacts

The analysis completed during preparation of the EA found the following impacts to the below-mentioned key resources would occur with construction and operation of the proposed Project.

Visual Impacts

The proposed transmission line would impact visual resources from construction activities and long-term operation of the proposed Project. The visibility of transmission structures and associated access roads from key observation points (residences, recreation areas, and Oxbow-Brownlee Road) would be the main source of visual impacts. Corten steel poles and non-specular conductors would be used to reduce visual contrast. IPC worked closely with BLM during the preliminary design phase to determine a route that would minimize impacts potentially caused by new access roads and other Project facilities contrasting with the existing landscape.

Bald Eagle

Known bald eagle nesting and wintering habitat does exist in the proposed Project area along the Oxbow Reservoir. Disturbance from construction activities and increased access from new roads could potentially

impact this species, however the transmission line would be routed to avoid the one known nest site, see figure 3-2 in Chapter 3. Limiting construction activities during wintering months would avoid impacts to wintering eagles, see figure 3-3 in Chapter 3.

Big Game

The proposed Project area is known habitat for bighorn sheep and wintering mule deer. Bighorn sheep use the area for lambing in the spring. Disturbance from construction activities and increased access from new roads could potentially impact big horn sheep and mule deer; however construction timing would allow for avoidance of impacts during lambing.

Recreation

Two developed recreation areas are located adjacent to the proposed Project area and much of the area is used for dispersed recreation (e.g., hunting, fishing, camping, wildlife viewing). The Project would not directly impact the developed recreation areas or change the availability of areas used for dispersed recreation. The Sheep Mountain WSA and Sheep Mountain ACEC are adjacent to the proposed Project, and may be indirectly impacted by increased access with the construction of new access roads. IPC would work with BLM to block access and revegetate these new access roads as needed to mitigate this impact.

Soil Erosion Hazard

Temporary soil surface disturbance would likely result from proposed Project construction causing some increased wind and water erosion rates and compaction levels. The potential for large-scale erosion may be increased in areas because of severe slopes and highly erodible soil types. In areas where potential impacts to water resources and wetlands are possible, mitigation measures committed to by IPC would be expected to be effective in reducing or eliminating those potential impacts.

Other Resource Impacts – Noise and Air

In addition to the key resource impacts, local concern was expressed for noise and air quality. A summary of these concerns follows: Temporary generators would be employed for intermittent use at the Duke and Halfway Substations in Oregon. These generators may cause short-term noise and air pollution impacts. The increase in noise would be temporary for three months and would not exceed the state standards for noise. The increase of air emissions is expected to be negligible, as the generators would only be called on to operate under 1000 hours meeting ODEQ requirements.

Public Review of EA

The EA will be available for a 30-day public review and comment period. If no significant impacts are identified and the proposed action is approved, BLM will issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for federal lands crossed by the Project. If the BLM determines that the EA does not sufficiently address alternatives and potential impacts, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) may be required for the Project to proceed.